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**THE PERSIAN GULF CONFLICT:
A LESSON IN CLAUSEWITZIAN THEORY**

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COURSE 2: FOUNDATIONS IN MILITARY THOUGHT

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"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

George Santayana

In the aftermath of the recent Persian Gulf Conflict, many of us who remembered Vietnam celebrated that we had finally shedded the stigma of that war. Indeed, the nation's frustrations at not winning the Vietnam war had resulted in numerous efforts to explain "what went wrong..." Strategists and other experts found it difficult to explain how a nation, regarded as the most powerful in the world, had wilted under the tremendous pressures of negative public sentiment created as a result of the protracted war. Finally in 1981, Colonel Harry G. Summers wrote the first creditable critique of the war in his book, On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context. Using Clausewitzian theory, Colonel Summers describes in clear terms how our national policies and military strategies failed us.

The purpose of this paper is not to revisit lessons learned from Vietnam. Instead, my intent is to use Clausewitz's theory to help "clarify concepts and ideas" which explain our successes in the Persian Gulf. It is my thesis that these successes are in large measure attributable to our understanding and application of this theory in the post-Vietnam period and during the Persian Gulf Conflict.

To accomplish this, I will look first at Clausewitz's concept of the "Trinity" and discuss the role each element played during the conflict. Secondly, I will look at the conduct of the war in the context of his theory, examining our "preparations for war" and actual combat or "The Engagement." Finally, I will critique the effectiveness of the theory to address contemporary issues of war, and it's relevance in terms of lessons learned for the future.

Background

"War is nothing but the continuation of policy by other means."

"No one starts a war--or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so--without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it."

Clausewitz, On War

When Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, it provided the first real test of whether our nation and its leaders had truly benefitted from the lessons of Vietnam. In that war, Colonel Summers concludes that the Government and our military leadership had failed to understand the nature of war; to establish clear policies and objectives; to develop an effective military strategy; and to calculate the will of the people. While history suggests that we understood the significance of these issues during our previously successful wars, for some mysterious reason in Vietnam these realities became obscured. It is principally through the work of Clausewitz that we have regained our focus. "The primary purpose of any theory," Clausewitz writes, "is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled."

THE REMARKABLE TRINITY

Dominant tendencies "always make war a remarkable trinity--composed of primordial violence, hatred, and emnity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone...The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army, the third the government.

Clausewitz, On War

Implied in Clausewitz's description of the trinity is a certain reciprocal effect each member has on the other. The extent to which we recognize these factors and plan for them accordingly, determines our success. When we have not thoroughly considered their unique character (e.g., Vietnam), we have not done well. The following is a brief description of their contributions during our war efforts in the Gulf.

The Government

If, as Clausewitz theorizes “war is the continuation of policy by other means,” then governments must take the lead in determining the use of this instrument. Despite Saddam’s example of naked aggression in Kuwait, the decision to go to war is never very simple. There are always interests and objectives to be considered. Nor does the government, as the trinity implies, participate in this decision alone. As Vietnam had demonstrated, the will of the people and participation by the armed forces are critical.

During the early days of the Gulf conflict, the government did, indeed, take the lead. There was immediate and frequent criticism of Saddam’s action by leaders in Congress and the Executive Branch. The President’s bold assertion on 5 August 1990 that “this shall not stand,” and his announcement of U.S. national policy objectives were classic Clausewitz. These goals became, as the Secretary of Defense noted, “the underpinning for our military objectives and the strategy to achieve those objectives.” U.S. national policy objectives are listed here:

- Immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait;
- Restoration of Kuwait’s legitimate government;
- Security and stability of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf; and
- Safety and protection of the lives of American citizens abroad.

Although these objectives became the source of much debate in Congress and abroad, the fact they remained virtually unchanged throughout the conflict attests to their relevance to U.S. interests. As I will note momentarily, they played a key role in maintaining the support of the people, shaping military strategies, and moving Congress later to support troop build-ups for offensive operations.

Perhaps the most important element in appreciating the government’s contributions to the conflict was the role played by the President. President Bush led the way in achieving political consensus both domestically and internationally. Not once did he waiver in his commitment.

The Commander and the Armed Forces

The role of the military in developing an effective strategy to support national policy objectives was also accomplished with alacrity. This strategy led to the development of the following military objectives for Desert Storm:

- Neutralization of the Iraqi national command authority's ability to direct military operations;
- Ejection of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and destruction of Iraq's offensive threat to the region, including the Republican Guard in the Kuwait Theater of Operations;
- Destruction of known nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons production and delivery capabilities, to include Iraq's known ballistic missile program; and;
- Assistance in the restoration of the legitimate government of Kuwait.

Similar objectives were developed for Desert Shield.

The unified command structure developed following Vietnam appeared to come together during the Gulf conflict. General Schwarzkopf was given great flexibility in developing a plan that addressed both strategic and operational considerations. Airland Battle Doctrine born in the wake of Vietnam, came of age. While describing these as the "right tools for victory." General Merrill McPeak, Air Force Chief of Staff noted, "It is important that we had one concept of operations--General Schwarzkopf's concept--for the air, land and sea campaign."

Interference and oversupervision of military aspects of the conflict by the White House that had characterized our involvement in Vietnam was eliminated. The President and the executive branch maintained their focus at the strategic level, receiving briefings and updates on operational issues.

The Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff performed a similar complementary role. General Powell interceded for and buffered field commanders from external distractions. His advice and counsel to the President was often frank and candid. Bob Woodward describes this relationship in his book, The Commander. He noted how General Powell avoided the "yes-man" syndrome, informing the President at one point of his reservations about what he believed to be a premature use of force in the Gulf. This type of dialogue

between the President and his senior military advisor was encouraged as constructive by Clausewitz who admonished military leaders to "be familiar with the higher affairs of state...and be able to form sound judgments." Again, this openness was missing in the atmosphere of Vietnam where presidents were often suspicious of the motivations senior military officers.

The People

In Clausewitz's "Trinity," people provide the will or "the engines of war." Ultimately war is reduced to a contest of wills. Clausewitz described the importance of moral factors in symbolic terms: "the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely honed blade."

Slow initially to grasp this concept, President Bush rebounded quickly and became an effective nurturer of public support and will. During visits to the Gulf in November 1990 he reiterated U.S. and coalition objectives for the war. He emphasized moral factors which supported our troops presence in the Gulf. His success in pressing forward in this issue was aided in large measure to Iraq's naked aggression in attacking Kuwait, and as one writer noted, "Saddam's own well-known behavioral excesses."

General Powell and Secretary of Defense Cheney also spent much of their time visiting troops in the field and promoting a similar theme. When asked by troops "what our plan would be when the battle started," Powell's popular response was, "We're going to cut 'em off, and then we're going to kill 'em!"

Ironically, Saddam Hussein also understood the significance of trying to influence American public opinion and will. His efforts to undermine American public support for the conflict is well documented. His use of the television early during the hostage crisis, and later as the bombing started, showed excellent appreciation for the power of this medium. In many respects, his actions suggest that he had determined that this was the achilles heel of our war efforts or as Clausewitz would have described it, our "center of gravity."

PREPARATIONS FOR WAR

"Strategy is the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war. The strategist must therefore define an aim for the entire operations side of the war that will be in accordance with its purpose ... he will draft the plan of the war ... shape the individual campaigns and, within these, decide on the individual engagements ... the strategist must go campaign himself [in order that proper adjustments may be made in the plan as the situation changes]."

Clausewitz, On War

Our leaders careful considerations of factors affecting the trinity in its planning facilitated the development of an effective strategy which was used to prosecute the war. This strategy called for an initial defensive phase to allow for the build up of forces. This would be followed fairly rapidly by an offensive phase, if necessary, to achieve national and military objectives.

During the initial defensive phase, the emphasis was on protecting Saudi Arabia, buying time for the sanctions to work and continuing the U.S. and coalition preparations for war. Again, the strategy was classic Clausewitzian, "...defense has a passive purpose: preservation, and attack a positive one: conquest. The latter increased one's own capacity to wage war..." Adoption of this posture allowed for the development of "a base of operations," consisting of "camps and billets" for troops. Objectives during this phase were achieved with overwhelming success. And, as Clausewitz had predicted, allowed for the rapid transition to offensive.

Moreover, it was during this phase (Desert Shield) that we won our first victory of the war--the deterrence of further aggression by Iraq. It appeared that Saddam made one of many miscalculations about American will. He wagered that time, as in Vietnam, would be on his side. In doing so, he lost a critical window of opportunity to exploit a weak American and coalition defensive posture early in the conflict.

THE ENGAGEMENT

Once the defender has gained an important advantage, ... the defense has done its work. [Now is the time for a] sudden powerful transition to the offensive--the flashing sword of vengeance.

Clausewitz, On War

General Schwarzkopf and his staff developed a simple offensive strategy to isolate, fix and destroy Iraqi forces by out maneuvering them on their flanks. The important job of isolating Iraqi forces by interdicting lines of communications was given to the Air Force and Navy. The Army, Marines and coalition land forces would attack through, what was assumed to be, heavy Iraqi defensive positions in Kuwait to fix the preponderance of Iraqi forces in the theater. Finally, U.S. and coalition land forces would sweep West into Iraq to envelope and destroy the Republican Guard forces in reserve positions. The Iraqi Republican Guard was determined to be the center of gravity for Iraq's Army.

This brief description of the plan captures most of the salient aspects of Clausewitz's engagement theory. While the concepts are not revolutionary and had been used well before his influence on American strategic and operational theory, it, nonetheless, had a significant impact on the process. General Schwarzkopf, described as a prolific reader of military history, had embellished the concepts of "maneuver warfare," "centers of gravity" and "friction." Ultimately he and his subordinate commanders' understanding of these concepts and their impacts contributed to their success in the Gulf.

CLAUSEWITZIAN THEORY: ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE?

My initial reaction to first reading Clausewitz was to ask, "What is new or unique about his work?" I found it to be full of cliches, overused jargon, and otherwise over emphasized points. After all, it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that "defense" is the strongest form of war.

However, I have discovered that there is more to Clausewitz's work than I had initially appreciated. Most importantly, Clausewitz's theory suggests forms and processes that can take us, in logical terms, to where we want to go.

In Vietnam, as an example, it was said we could not see the forest for the trees. Ten years ago as Colonel Summers reread Clausewitz, our problems in Vietnam became clear. It is a tribute to Clausewitz that his theory remains relevant.

Certainly there are some aspects of his theory that do fall short. For example, it is unlikely that he could have contemplated the significant impact air and naval power would

have. Modern technology has also expanded the theater of operations beyond recognition. "Friction," a subject to which he appears to devote an inordinate amount of time, was reduced to only a minor distraction, as little was left to chance in the Gulf War.

Lessons Learned

The lessons learned from the Gulf conflict are too numerous to list. Many from Vietnam were simply revalidated. Some important ones are listed below:

- 1) The process of deriving clear national policy objectives early which can be reasonably translated to military objectives is key.
- 2) The reciprocating roles of Government, the armed forces and the people in the trinity cannot be overemphasized.
- 3) The concept of the unified command under one "Commander-in-Chief" was validated.
- 4) The development of strategies and warplans that exploit offensive maneuver techniques and emphasize combined armed synchronization to bring about a swift resolution of the conflict must continue to be preferred.
- 5) Efforts to develop consensus among allies must be encouraged before and continue during the conflict.
- 6) Expansion of our efforts to acquire heavy lift capabilities as a part of Clausewitz's "preparations for war" must be encouraged.

Conclusion

The Persian Gulf conflict by all assessments has been regarded as a tremendous success for the nation, its leaders and its armed forces. Clausewitz's theory, On War, has provided the road map to that success.